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## THE BAPTISMAL FORMULA OF MATT. 28:19, IN THE LIGHT OF JESUS' UNQUESTIONABLE TEACHING

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There is a court of last appeal before which the genuineness of the baptismal formula in Matt. 28:19 has not yet been brought. Mr. Conybeare showed in the *Hibbert Journal* for 1903, pp. 102-8, that there is important external evidence against the existence of this formula in manuscripts current before the time of Eusebius, and various recent writers have urged that the practice of baptism in Acts and the epistles of Paul is utterly incompatible with the view that Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (e. g., Martineau, *The Seat of Authority in Religion*, p. 515; Percy Gardner, *Exploratio Evangelica*, p. 445; Sabatier, *Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, p. 52; Harnack, *History of Dogma*, I, 79, note); but although each of these lines of argument is forcible, and, to some minds, conclusive, there remains an argument which is, if possible, of even greater cogency.

Before proceeding to set forth this argument that lies imbedded in the gospels, let a word be said about the need of it. There are still not a few scholars who seek to defend the genuineness of the words in question, or, if not the very words themselves, at least their essential content, not to mention others who, like the author of the Kerr Lectures for 1901, do not appear to allow that the genuineness of the passage is for a moment debatable. It is accepted by them as unimpeachable.

Among those who defend the passage we may mention the late Professor Stevens, of Yale, who uses this strong language concerning the baptismal formula:

We may confidently say that, in its substance, it accords with the whole genius of our Lord's teaching and work, and well expresses what we may believe

to have been the hope and purpose of Jesus in associating his disciples together for the preservation and propagation of his truth and kingdom.<sup>1</sup>

In general accord with this position is that of Dr. Allen in *The International Critical Commentary*, the volume on Matthew (1907). "The conclusion," he says, "that the formula as here recorded marks a developed and late stage of doctrinal belief and ecclesiastical practice is unjustified." After remarking that the phrase in question "may have stood in the lost ending of Mark," and that, "in any case, the conception, 'Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,' is clearly as old as the Christian society itself," he says:

Even if the editor of the First Gospel was the first to connect baptism into the threefold Name with a command of Jesus, he was probably only bringing that rite into connection with a circle of christological ideas and phrases which were current in the early Palestinian church, and which from Palestine had penetrated Christian teaching everywhere.

To the names of these two writers we may add that of Dr. Plummer whose view, though more conservative, is also more consistent. "It is reasonable to believe," he says, "that Christ prescribed the Trinitarian formula and that his command was obeyed." This view relieves us of the difficulty of trying to separate the "substance" of the baptismal formula from the words, assigning these to the editor of the gospel, that to Christ. "It is a violent hypothesis," says Dr. Plummer, "to suppose that words of such importance as Matt. 28:19 were never spoken by Christ, and yet were authoritatively attributed to him in the First Gospel" (see Hastings, *Bible Dictionary*, article "Baptism").

Now while it would be easy to pit against these three scholars another three who reject the genuineness of the baptismal formula, this would hardly conduce to a real settlement of the question. It will be more profitable to seek new light, and such, we think, is furnished by the life and words of Jesus. If he, when risen from the dead, "prescribed the Trinitarian formula" to his disciples, we shall find in the record of his life some facts or words or both which are in line with that command, just as each of the four other clauses of this farewell address in Matt. 28:18-20 is in line with some recorded word of Jesus. But if, instead of facts or words which are in line

<sup>1</sup> *Theology of the New Testament*, 1899, p. 148.

with that command, we find there facts and words which are directly opposed to the view that the command came from Jesus, then the case is closed. We cannot believe that the teaching of Jesus after his resurrection was at variance with that which he gave during his lifetime. There is very good reason indeed to doubt whether the appearance of the risen Lord was for any other purpose whatever than to convince the disciples of the truth of his messianic claim; but even if it were admitted that he may have resumed his teaching in those mysterious days between his resurrection and his ascension, it is impossible to hold that this posthumous instruction contravened the clear words which he spoke while present in the flesh.

We come back then to the main proposition, that the testimony of the life and words of Jesus is against the genuineness of the baptismal formula of Matt. 28:19. There are three broad features of the life and teaching of Jesus to be considered. First, there is his attitude toward religious rites, particularly the rite of baptism. It is obvious, in general, that, as we go back from the church life of the third or the second century, "the nearer we approach his person, the more do we leave every outward form and questionable claim behind, and are left alone with the pure elements of spiritual religion." But we cannot stop with this general statement. According to John (3:22—4:2) there was a period after the first Passover in which the disciples of Jesus baptized, of course with his approval. This baptism is set in parallelism with that of the forerunner, in whose immediate vicinity it was carried on. There is no suggestion that it differed from this, though if it had been of a higher order it would have been in harmony with the author's aim to have mentioned the fact. It was therefore merely a baptism of repentance in view of the coming of the kingdom. But with the return of Jesus into Galilee and his entrance on the mission which is described by the Synoptic Gospels, this preparatory baptism disappears. There is neither an allusion to it in these gospels, nor an allusion to any form of baptism. Even in the directions to the disciples on their going forth to teach, both those directions which contemplated a tour in Galilee while Jesus was alive, and those which looked forward to the times after his departure—directions which are blended in Matt., chap. 10 (cf. Luke 9:1-6, 10; 10:1-20)—there is not a word of baptism.

The bearing of this fact on the genuineness of the baptismal formula is clearly and strongly adverse. Jesus received men into discipleship without baptism, and never during his lifetime intimated that his followers should depart from his example. Therefore the baptismal formula of Matt. 28:19 is discredited by the unquestionable practice of Jesus.

Again, this alleged establishment by Jesus of an outward form of baptism is discredited by the spirituality of the conditions of membership which are found in his words. He offered his kingdom to anyone who would have it. This kingdom was, first and foremost, the reign of God in the heart, and the sole condition of receiving it was an open heart. Or, to state the matter in other words, the conditions of admission to the circle of the disciples of Jesus were repentance and obedience. If we were to base our view of Jesus' thought on his parable of the Lost Son, we should say that the one condition of membership in the divine kingdom was *returning* to the Father. So in all the words of Jesus regarding entrance into his kingdom we find only spiritual conditions. When he demanded of a certain young man that he should sell all he had and give to the poor, he was not setting up a new general condition of discipleship, but only applying a severe test in a particular case. No doubt the young man might have brought all his wealth into the kingdom if only Jesus had been sure that the kingdom was already in his heart.

Now this fact that Jesus attached only spiritual conditions to membership in his kingdom is perfectly patent, and its bearing on the genuineness of the baptismal formula is clear. Spiritual conditions of membership and ceremonial conditions are diverse, heterogeneous, incompatible. To suppose that the Master who, throughout his ministry, had spoken only of spiritual conditions of membership in his kingdom, appeared to his disciples after his death and erected a ceremonial condition, is to suppose that death had radically changed and lowered his conceptions. But this is surely unthinkable.

Finally, the testimony of Jesus is against the genuineness of the baptismal formula because of the use which that formula makes of divine names. Two points should here be considered: First, it is contrary to the usage of Jesus to make a personal distinction between the Holy Spirit and the Father. His view of the Spirit, according to the

synoptists, was not different from that of the prophets. On the one or possibly two occasions during his lifetime when he referred to the Spirit, there is nothing to suggest that his view was unlike that of Joel or Ezekiel. The "Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11; Luke 12:12) is the "Spirit of your Father" (Matt. 10:20); that is to say, it is "your Father" as a present spiritual power (see John 4:24). It will not be questioned by anyone that Jesus thought of God as a Spirit. When therefore he spoke of "the Spirit of your Father," he surely did not mean the Spirit *of* the Spirit who is God, but simply the spiritual presence of the Father. But this conception is radically unlike that of the baptismal formula where the Holy Spirit is as separate and distinct from the Father as is the Son. It belongs to an entirely different sphere of thought regarding the Divine Being. One cannot properly say that the conception of the Spirit in the baptismal formula is a *development* from the words of Jesus, for those words move within the lines of prophetic monotheism, while the baptismal formula, as all scholars agree, presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity.

The second point to be observed in the use of names in the baptismal formula is the position of the word "Son." It is obvious that the location of this word between "Father" and "Holy Spirit" is virtually a claim that the Son stands on the same level with them. The position takes him up, as it were, into the very center of the Deity. But to this claim the words of Jesus in our oldest sources stand opposed. Unique and divine as is their claim regarding the *character* of the Master—a claim as fully involved in his life as in his words—they not only never contain a claim like that of the baptismal formula, but in the clearest, most unambiguous terms assert what is diametrically opposed to the implication of that passage. They assert manhood, they deny attributes of Deity (e. g., omniscience and absolute goodness). Therefore it is impossible to hold that the Jesus of the Synoptic Gospels can have spoken the words of the baptismal formula unless the incident of death radically changed his self-consciousness.

Thus the argument found in the words and life of Jesus against the genuineness of the baptismal formula is a "threefold cord." The story of his life contains no trace of baptism in connection with

entrance into his kingdom; in the practice of his ministry the sole conditions of admission into his fellowship were spiritual; and finally, his view of the Holy Spirit, which was that of the prophets, and his own self-consciousness, on which the oldest sources leave us in no doubt, are clearly adverse to the conceptions on these subjects which are involved in the baptismal formula.



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